

E4C 2022 John 10:22-30 & Psalm 23

Every year, a few weeks after Easter, we read Psalm 23 and one of the several passages in John's gospel where Jesus compares himself to a shepherd. We may wonder why Jesus, son of a carpenter, friend of fishermen, so frequently used the sheep and shepherd metaphor, but I bet Jesus could recite Psalm 23 from memory even better than we can. The metaphor of king as shepherd is not unique to the Bible but was popular across the various cultures of the ancient near east. Good royal propaganda would portray kings protecting and providing for their subjects in the same way a shepherd would care for his sheep. Authorship of Psalm 23 is attributed to King David, who was a shepherd in his first career and who was even out tending the sheep when Samuel arrived to anoint him as Israel's next king. The psalm likens the Lord to a shepherd, so the people would think of the Lord acting on their behalf like a benevolent king. When Jesus speaks of himself as a shepherd, the people, familiar with the Jewish scriptures, would have remembered this psalm and other writings and thought of Jesus as both king and Lord: leading, guiding, and protecting them as if they were his flock of sheep.

When these shepherd passages come up in the lectionary, all the biblical scholars like to double as experts on livestock. So even if you don't have much personal experience with sheep, you can read all about how skittish and dumb they tend to be, so how easy it is for them to get lost or scattered; about how they need insect repellent, like the anointing oil in the psalm, to keep parasites away; about how they aren't good swimmers, so they need to drink from calm water as opposed to a rushing river. So if we examine all the details mentioned in the psalm we can see how, like sheep, we are hungry, thirsty, needy, wayward, and prone to disaster. But before we get too caught up in listing all the ways that we are like sheep, remember that we don't call this Bad Sheep Sunday; we call it Good Shepherd Sunday. Because it's really not about us.

Today we'll sing a few versions of Psalm 23, all pretty faithful to the structure and wording of the original, which focuses on the actions of the shepherd, not the sheep. The speaker, who portrays himself as a sheep, is the passive recipient of the shepherd's care. The sheep really isn't *doing* anything; the shepherd is the one who makes the sheep lie

down in green pastures, who leads the sheep beside still waters, who restores and comforts, who prepares a table, who anoints and fills the cup that runneth over. The shepherd is the one who is doing all the heavy lifting.

And so it is with Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Jesus says, *My sheep hear my voice*, but *hearing* isn't something we can choose to do. We can *listen*, but we have no choice over whether or not we *hear*; either the voice or the noise is loud enough and we can't help but hear it, or it's too soft and quiet for us to make it out. We only ever hear because Jesus does the calling. Jesus says, *I know them*, not, as the religious tracts under our windshield wipers insist, that *we* need to know *him* in some specific way in order to be saved. *I give them eternal life*, Jesus says, and *no one will snatch them out of my hand*. If we ever needed something to give us confidence in God's faithfulness to us, it would have to be Jesus' claim that nothing—not even someone actively trying—could take us away from him. And again, all of the work, all of the action, everything that can be done is done not by us but by the Shepherd.

We most often pray Psalm 23 at funerals, mostly because everyone knows it, but probably also because of that last verse about dwelling in the house of the Lord forever. Yet the psalmist says almost nothing about an afterlife compared to the thorough narration of the practical, necessary ways in which God provides for us *now*. These are not promises for which we have to wait, or a future for which we have to work, but a bold claim that *this* abundant life is the work of the Good Shepherd. *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life*...and even that lovely, lilting poetry doesn't quite capture the urgency that we are not so much *followed* by goodness and mercy, but we are *pursued, chased, or hunted* is a better way to say it: God hunts us down to shower us with goodness and mercy all the days of our lives; we couldn't escape if we wanted to; we can't be snatched from God's hand, no matter what.

Psalm 23 will probably be prayed over most of us one final time. When that day comes, may these words not just commend us to dwell in the house of the Lord after death; may they testify that we lived with confidence in the Good Shepherd: led, restored, comforted, and anointed, chased by goodness and mercy, gifted with abundant life.